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SUBJECT: DIYALA'S SUNNI ARABS ON ELECTORAL FRAUD: INSECURE
MAJORITY'S LAMENT OR PREP FOR POST-ELECTION PROTEST?

Classified By: Diyala PRT Leader George White: Reasons 1.4 (b and d).

This is a PRT Diyala reporting cable.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In conversations with us January 19-21, Sunni Arab officials in Diyala insisted that Shi'a and Kurds in the province intend to steal the upcoming Provincial Council (PC) elections. Sunni Arabs fear their perceived demographic majority will be neutralized and they will not win the number of PC seats in Diyala they deserve due to election fraud and intimidation. While some, but not all, of our interlocutors' complaints have validity, their anxiety about possible fraud and intimidation betrays a sense of powerlessness -- their sense that despite their majority status, the Sunni Arabs cannot assert themselves. Sunni Arab leaders were over-confident with us in their assessments of Diyala's ethnic and sectarian demography and under-confident about their ability to gain influence through elections. Their complaints may set the stage for post-election protests if Shi'a and Kurds move to form a post-election ruling coalition. END SUMMARY.

ALLEGATIONS OF INTIMIDATION

¶2. (U) Visiting poloff discussed preparations for provincial elections with Muqdadia Qaimaqam (mayor) Najem Al Harvey in his office on January 19, Hibhib Mudeer (city manager) Yarob Al Qaysi in his office January 20, and Diyala Deputy Provincial Council Chair Abdal Jabbar Mohammed in his office on January 21. These Sunni Arab PC candidates and local officials told poloff that Shi'a and Kurdish elements in the province are employing fraud and intimidation to reduce the number of seats Sunni Arabs will win in the provincial council elections. With a strong sense of injustice, they enumerated a litany of wrongs against them.

¶3. (C) Sunni Arabs maintain that the Government of Iraq (GOI) initiated "anti-terrorist" security operations by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in summer/fall 2008 to intimidate Sunnis in Diyala, by detaining Sunni leaders in an effort to remove them from contention in provincial elections (reftel). Najem Al Harvey and Abdal Jabbar Mohammed both saw the detentions as false accusations and an electoral tactic rather than a security measure. Najem himself was subject to an arrest warrant which was recently rescinded. Abdal Jabbar asserts that no militia members were arrested in recent ISF security operations, only legitimate Sunni Arab leaders. Hibhib Mudeer (city manager) Yarob Al Qaysi told poloff that many good Sunni candidates were banned or removed themselves from running for the PC because of false accusations of Ba'athist activity or former Ba'athist ties.

¶4. (C) Najem claimed that a telephone call he received during our meeting informed him that the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) was withdrawing his official security detail.

He insisted that the call, and the supposed withdrawal of his detail, were the result of our elections discussion. Najem also alleged that Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the Jalaula, Mikhas, and Halowan areas of Diyala were threatening to remove Sunni Arabs from these towns to frighten them into abstaining from voting.

15. (C) Abdal Jabbar told poloff that Sunni Arab internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning to their homes in the Diyala towns of Abu Said, Khalis, Jadida Tashaat, Huwayder, and Kharnabat may not vote on election day due to fears that Qand Kharnabat may not vote on election day due to fears that Shi'a militias will block the roads to voting centers. He added that Sunni leaders had asked Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to move some voting centers into predominantly Sunni areas to avoid this, and that IHEC moved only one -- from Hudmazit to Ghesayba.

16. (C) Najem and Abdal Jabbar, both PC candidates, alleged that their campaign posters were being torn down -- a crime punishable by a fine and prison term. Najem claimed that one afternoon his team put up over 200 posters in Muqdadiya, only seven of which remained visible the following day. Abdal Jabbar affirmed that confidential contacts within the Iraqi Police (IP) told him that the IP were responsible for tearing down his and other Sunni posters in the middle of the night -- at the direction of the MOI. (Comment: A cursory examination of campaign posters reveals a decided Shi'a dominance, but some Sunni candidates' posters are visible. (End comment.) According to Abdal Jabbar, it is impossible to bring these accusations to IHEC or security authorities because he does not have photographic proof of it happening. He also fears making official charges since he does not trust

BAGHDAD 00000207 002 OF 002

the (largely Shi'a) IP.

17. (C) Najem added false vote tallying the evening of the election and the potential for poll workers to mislead uneducated Sunnis to the list of frauds that Shi'a and Kurds might perpetrate. Arkan Hassan Abdallah, a Ba'aqubah attorney, alleged that Shi'a poll workers would illegally cast votes for Sunni residents who did not present themselves to vote on election day.

SHI'A PAYING SUNNI ARABS TO REGISTER NEW POLITICAL ENTITIES

18. (C) Another electoral irregularity that was of particular concern to Abdal Jabbar was that Shi'a parties were paying poor Sunnis to register new political entities for the election. In this way, according to Abdal Jabbar, the proliferation of Sunni Arab candidates would dilute the strength of the Sunni majority in Diyala, with Sunni votes being wasted among many small parties. He claimed that the Constitution Party (led by Interior Minister Bulani) and the IP, as well as Sunni tribes and independent parties, were leading this effort. When asked, he did not elaborate on which tribes and independent parties were involved.

19. (C) When shown a list of Diyala political entities/coalitions/parties running in the provincial elections, Abdal Jabbar identified the Iraqi National Unity Gathering, Iraqi Qualified Independent Gathering, Al Umoum National Iraqi Council, the National Council for Iraq Tribes Gathering, the Unified Iraqi Nation, as parties that "poor" Sunnis formed after being paid by Shi'as.

110. (C) Comment: The glut of candidates in other Sunni Arab-majority areas of Iraq (e.g., Anbar, Ninewa) casts doubt on the allegation that the Shi'a in Diyala are responsible for the overabundance of Sunni candidates in this province. Nonetheless, Abdal Jabbar pinpoints a key issue for Sunni Arabs: the proliferation of small Sunni Arab parties, in an electoral system that over-represents large blocs and

coalitions, will dilute Sunni Arab political power. By accusing the Shi'a, Abdal Jabbar (Tawafuq/IIP) may be disguising his frustration with his fellow Sunnis and their zeal for running in the elections. End comment.

¶11. (C) Abdal Jabbar has not brought this to the attention of IHEC since he merely "has a feeling, but it is not clear." He does not have proof. Neither has he attempted to work with other Sunni candidates, because he thinks they will not listen to a competitor and a PC incumbent.

A DEFEATIST TONE

¶12. (C) The Sunnis we spoke with sound very defeatist when talking about potential fraud in the elections. Abdal Jabbar stated "the Shi'a have a plan (to limit Sunni power) and there is little we can do about it." He asked for USG assistance in bringing these problems to public attention. He also asked for a visible Coalition Forces (CF) presence during the election period, U.S. help in detainee voter education, a U.S. presence on Special Needs Voting day, and U.S. protection on election day.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) PRT and CF in Diyala agree that some Sunni Arab claims of election harassment are valid, including allegations the PM or his supporters have directed security forces to intimidate Sunni Arab politicians, but others are misguided. Despite Abdal Jabbar's claims that "80% of the population is Sunni" (an exaggeration, in our view) in Qpopulation is Sunni" (an exaggeration, in our view) in Diyala, the intensity of Sunni Arab complaints suggests that they are not confident about January 31. Sunnis do not seem to believe that they can overcome entrenched power -- both political and security force -- in Diyala. (Or, alternatively, they may know that their majority is not as large as they claim.) In this case, their worrying may set the stage for post-election protests against a result wherein Sunni Arabs do not win a majority of PC seats, and Shi'a and Kurds form a ruling coalition in the new Diyala PC, even if there are no large-scale election irregularities. END COMMENT.
CROCKER